

## History of Three Larger Parks

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Three of Fairbury's larger parks include Sunken Park, North Park, and Veterans Memorial Park.

### **Veteran's Memorial Park**

After Marsh Park and the Commons area, the next area to be developed into a city park was just east of old City Hall. This whole block was occupied by Von Tobel's lumberyard buildings on the 1885 Sanborn maps. Citizens thought the lumberyard was unsightly and wanted a lovely park, so visitors on the train had a good first impression of Fairbury. In 1900, a group of citizens approached Von Tobel and offered him \$400 to move his lumberyard to the southwest corner of Seventh and Locust Streets. While negotiations were taking place with Von Tobel, the Wilson Lumber company bought the inventory and buildings. The area was then completely cleared.

The new park site had just one problem: it was depressed or sunken two to three feet. The citizens tried filling it with sand from the Munz sand pit south of town. This plan did not work well. Then, the TP&W railroad offered to bring in fill dirt on flatbed cars if volunteers would unload it. Many volunteers helped move the fill material from the train cars to fill up the park. In 1902, the Fairbury GAR (Grand Army of the Republic) Post 75 donated two Civil War cannons to the park. Women's groups held many fundraisers to pay for the other items needed for the park. The new park was donated to the city and was named Central Park.

In 1921, about twenty years after the citizens got Central Park built, the TP&W railroad proposed building a new roundhouse on the same site. Although it was desirable to have the new roundhouse in Fairbury, citizens did not want to exchange their beautiful new park for a "smoke-vomiting roundhouse." The railroad plans for the new roundhouse in Central Park were rejected.

In the early 1970s, the fountain often became a huge bubble generator. The laundry mats sold miniature boxes of laundry soap in a vending machine, and teenagers would dump the whole box of soap into the fountain.

In 1997, Bluestem Bank donated funds to purchase a gazebo, which was installed on top of the old fountain. At the time, the two old Civil War cannons were temporarily removed. Arrowhead Lodge used donated labor and materials to reinstall the cannons in the park in 2005.

In 2008, John Tollensdorf, Sr., donated the old Isaac Walton school bell to the City of Fairbury. It was installed in the park with an iron fence around it.

The park's east end was then updated to honor our military veterans. In 2012, the Fairbury City Council voted to change the name from Central Park to Veteran's Memorial Park. In 2016, the Fairbury Improvement Group added five historical murals to the park. These murals cover the railroad, coal mining, Frances Townsend, the Fairbury Fair and racetrack, and John Virgin. The Fairbury Garden Club maintains all the beautiful flowers and plants in this park.

### **SUNKEN PARK**

Sunken Park is one of Fairbury's history mysteries. Nobody is exactly sure why this area is sunken thirty-six inches into the ground. Fern Wharton was a reporter for the Blade in the 1980s. In her 1985 column, she asked the readers if anyone knew why this area was sunken, and none of the readers could answer this question.

The most logical explanation is that in 1857, the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad excavated this area for dirt to help build the railroad bed. In her Nicks from the Blade writings, Alma Lewis James noted that grocery stores on Locust Street used to dispose of their spoiled food in this depressed area. She also said that citizens used it as the city dump until Hi Taylor became Street Commissioner and stopped this practice. Alma said that after the citizens built Central Park, they decided it would be stylish and different to have a "Sunken Garden."

The early Sanborn Insurance maps drawn between 1885 and 1911 show grain storage buildings located in the depressed area. Several photographs from this era also show frame buildings in the depressed area.

The earliest reference to Sunken Park occurred in the Blade in July 1915. Some boys in Sunken Park ignited some skyrockets. Unfortunately, one of the skyrockets entered the open window of the German Apostolic Church in the middle of Sunday services. The church congregation was shocked, but nobody was injured.

The first mention of Sunken Park in the Pantagraph occurred in June of 1919. The Pantagraph noted there would be a July 4th celebration with a band concert and a luncheon in honor of Fairbury World War I soldiers in Sunken Park.

There is a circa 1914 panoramic photo of Sunken Park filled with early motorcyclists and their riders. Over the years, Sunken Park has been used for band concerts, pep rallies, dances, ice skating, and pet parades.

In June 1985, a controversy developed about Sunken Park. Fosdick Poultry announced plans to fill in Sunken Park and build a new processing plant on that site. Fortunately for the park, the Fairbury City Council, in a 5-2 vote, vetoed the plan to convert the park to a food processing plant.

In the summer months, children continue to play football and baseball at Sunken Park. For a couple of years, the park hosted the popular food festival A Local Taste: Flavors from the Farm.

### **North Park**

Fairbury's largest park is North Park. It includes tennis courts, basketball courts, sand volleyball courts, a baseball field, soccer fields, two open pavilions, one restroom facility, a large screened-in pavilion, and an eight-foot-wide concrete walking trail that extends around the perimeter of the park and is very popular with citizens.

Construction of North Park started in 1998. Floyd and Marion Stafford donated funds to build the park, a joint project between the City of Fairbury and the Prairie Lands Foundation. The last part of the project was the sizeable screened-in pavilion, which was completed in June 2004. The Marion McDowell Stafford Charitable Trust and the John and Tula Wade Endowment Fund donated funds to build this pavilion.



The 1967 Fairbury Chamber of Commerce booklet included this photo of the fountain that used to be in Veterans Memorial Park (formerly Central Park). In that era, the two Civil War cannons were located just south of this fountain.